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ABSTRACT

Examples cited refute a generally accepted view that the origins of metaphors are arbitrary. To illustrate this point, examples are cited of how products of nature (curcubitic plants: melons, pumpkins) are used as references to people and their characteristics (hardiness, appearance, texture, inertness, reproductive and sexual connotations). In various contexts these comparisons express similarity and differences, two principles upon which metaphors typically develop. The frequent occurrences of plant metaphors suggest that nature, or reinforcement through nature, has played the larger role in the metaphors' survival. Accordingly, curcubitic symbolism has tended not to exist or to survive in parts of the world in which the plants do not occur. Thus the capability of users of the symbol to grasp its meaning depends on both the tradition of the sign and the user's knowledge of curcubitic plants. (MSE)

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ON THE DEGREE OF MOTIVATION IN SIGNS USED IN METAPHORS INVOLVING PLANT SYMBOLISM

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1. Arbitrariness in semiotics

When Ferdinand de Saussure presented the principle of the arbitraire du signe in his course of general linguistics, he seems to have thought of the sign primarily in a fairly limited sense. In Part One, "General Principles", Chapter I, where he deals specifically with the nature of the linguistic sign, he gives as the first of his two important principles the arbitrariness of the sign, and begins his exemplification by stating that there is no link of an inner relationship between the idea of 'sister' and the succession of sounds s-ö-r which serves as its signifier in French. According to the notes of most students he then further pointed out that the arbitrariness of linguistic signs is exemplified by the very existence of different languages: 'ox' is b-ö-f on one side of the border and o-k-s on the other. (Cf. Mauro 1972:100.)

At the end of his treatment of the principle of arbitrariness, before proceeding to his second principle (linearity), he anticipates hostile criticism by dealing with two phenomena that might seem to contradict the idea of arbitrariness. Significantly these are onomatopoeia and interjections; thus his concern is again with sounds.

But between the "ox" example and his remarks on onomatopoeia came some reflections which have already caused much confusion among followers and will doubtless cause much more. In Bally's and Sechehaye's reconstruction Saussure's ideas are reported as follows:

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> Une remarque en passant: quand la sémiologie sera organisée, elle devra se demander si les modes d'expression qui reposent sur des signes entièrement naturels -- comme la pantomime -- lui reviennent de droit. En supposant qu'elle les accueille, son principal objet n'en sera pas moins l'ensemble des systèmes fondés sur l'arbitraire du signe. En effet tout moyen d'expression reçu dans une société repose en principe sur une habitude collective ou, ce qui revient au même, sur la convention. Les signes de politesse, par exemple, doués souvent d'une certaine expressivité natu[r]elle (qu'on pense au Chinois qui salue son empereur en se prosternant neuf fois jusqu'à terre), n'en sont pas moins fixés par règle; c'est cette règle qui oblige à les employer non leur valeur intrinsèque. On peut donc dire que les signes entièrement arbitraires réalisent mieux que les autres l'idéal du procédé sémiologique; c'est pourquoi la langue, le plus complexe et le plus répandu des systèmes d'expression, est aussi le plus caractéristique de tous; en ce sens la linguistique peut devenir le patron général de toute sémiologie, bien que la langue ne soit qu'un système particulier.
>
> On s'est servi du mot symbole pour désigner le signe linguistic, on plus exactement ce que nous appellons le signifiant. Il y a des inconvénients à l'admettre, justement à cause de notre premier principe. Le symbole a pour caractère de n'être jamais tout à fait arbitraire; il n'est pas vide, il y a un rudiment de lien naturel entre le signifiant et le signifié. Le symbole de la justice, la balance, ne pourrait pas être remplacé par n'importe quoi, un char, par exemple.
>
> (Mauro 1972:100-1)

If we try to interpret this passage with the aid of Rudolf Engler's critical edition (Engler 1967:153-5)[1], a number of ideas emerge, though what importance Saussure gave to each of these, and what he meant their relations with each other to be, is not very easy to make out. At least a few points stand out fairly clearly:

- that there are modes of expression based on completely natural signs (pantomime),
- that if the new science of semiology welcomes these, its main concern will still be with the systems based on the arbitrariness of the sign,
- that signs which are wholly arbitrary realize better than others the ideal of the semiological process; therefore linguistics should be the prime example for all branches of semiology,
- also that even if there is a certain natural expressiveness in some signs (such as formulas of politeness) they are nevertheless fixed by rule and it is the rule that counts; nevertheless also, on the other hand, that the term "symbol" should not be used, because a symbol is not arbitrary, it could not be replaced by any other symbol.

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[1] The literature on the arbitraire is voluminous. For a brief survey, see Mauro (1972: 442-9); for further references, see Koerner (1972); also Koerner (1971).

What emerges from a study of the notes in Engler is a picture of some of these ideas as parenthetical and maybe even to some extent tentative and provisional. Saussure asks himself how far semiology could extend its domain ("Où s'arrête la sémiologie? C'est difficile à dire d'avance." Engler 1967: 154), and it seems that at least partly he thinks in terms of reluctantly going down a scale of decreasing arbitrariness. It is clear that Saussure pronounced a value-judgement in favour of arbitrariness, in that he regards the systems based on arbitrary signs as more interesting for the semiologist to study than others. Saussure was wondering about the "cut-off-level" on the scale of decreasing arbitrariness where a system of signs would no longer be very interesting to semiologists.

It is possible that Saussure's value-judgement about arbitrariness versus non-arbitrariness has influenced some recent attempts to determine the exact degree of arbitrariness of signs in certain sign-systems not in the legitimate sense of making investigators more interested in the systems in which signs are more arbitrary, but rather in the misguided sense of making people anxious to prove as high a degree of arbitrariness as possible in any system of signs.[2]

Saussure confidently predicted that the new science of semiology had a right to existence; that its place was assured in advance (Mauro 1972:33). Today, with the rise of such schools as French structuralism, and particularly after the first congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies held in Milan in 1974, many people think that Saussure's prophesy is coming true.

In the passage from the Cours cited above Saussure, by mentioning them in the same context, linked the question of the extension of the domain of semiotics (as we have now agreed to call semiology) and the question of the arbitrariness or non-arbitrariness of signs; and that link was prophetic too.

It was prophetic because many of the new branches of semiotics proliferating at the moment inevitably sooner or later come up against the question of the arbitrariness of signs. In actual fact some of them come up not only against Saussure -- they may also find it difficult to avoid the

---

[2] Another factor also influences these attempts to emphasize arbitrariness. There is a tendency for people always to regard the signs of their own semiotic systems as inherently "natural". Having discovered that this is a fallacy it is tempting to generalize the discovery to a universal theory of semiotic relativity and make arbitrariness a dogma, in the initial enthusiastic desire to share with one's readers the discovery that systems may vary.

physei-thesei debate. The question of the boundaries of φύσις, nature, and νόμος, convention, was debated by the ancient Greeks in connection with language too, as in the Cratylus, and this question has been so basic through the ages that actually it seems possible to view the whole history of linguistics in terms of a pendulum swinging from one extreme on the physei-thesei continuum to the other, as Morton Bloomfield (1973) does in an essay in Daedalus.

The very fact of the continued debate between naturalists and conventionalists could suggest that both are partly right and that language is a mixture of nature and convention. Even so it remains to be determined what is the share of each.

2. Arbitrariness and metaphors

If Saussure's arbitraire is made into a dogma the sense of "linguistic sign" should be strictly limited. One should not, for instance, overemphasize the idea of the arbitraire in a discussion of metaphor. This, however, does seem to happen. In Derek Bickerton's 'Prolegomena to a Linguistic Theory of Metaphor', for instance, the author states quite bluntly:

> Meaning exists, if anywhere, only in the relationship speaker-language-hearer, not in any one of the three, and least of all in any connection between language and the extralinguistic universe.
> (Bickerton 1969:38)

To illustrate this he has just given an example which, like those of Saussure, concerns sound: he points out that le provoca un tinto? means one thing to a Spaniard and another to a Colombian.

It is true that the sound sequence [laiən] for the idea of 'lion' in English is arbitrary. But to proceed from this to the idea that t h e a n i m a l " l i o n " i s c h o s e n a r b i t r a r i l y in the metaphor "the man is a lion" is a very questionable jump, and an unjustified extension of the idea of the arbitraire. Nevertheless it seems as if some such idea did influence Bickerton's argument:

> This connection is subtle enough to have misled some very acute linguists. Bazell, for instance, remarks: "Both green wine and yellow wine are combinations seldom or never to be found. But the reason is different for the former, where it is a question of lacking material motive, and for the latter, where it is a matter of syntactic convention" (1953,83). Now by 'material motive' Bazell presumably means that "there is no green wine in nature", and by 'syntactic convention', that wine which is (at least to speakers of what Whorf

called SAE) optically yellow is habitually modified, across several languages, by the adjective white and its equivalents. But even leaving aside the fact that interpretation of the spectrum is a linguistic variable, this will not do. What of Portuguese vinho verde, or, nearer home, yellow rat (which is not a rat, either) or green fingers? Or take the following table:

iron-mine	*steel-mine
iron ore	*steel ore
ironworks	steelworks
iron magnate	steel magnate
iron production	steel production
iron girder	steel girder
iron determination	*steel determination
iron will	*steel will
iron discipline	*steel discipline

Bazell would presumably account for the non-occurrence of the first two items in the right-hand column, and the occurrence of the next four, by saying that while steel-mines and steel ore do not exist in nature, steelworks, steel magnates etc. do. But if he tried thus to account for the non-occurrence of the last three, he would be unable to account for the occurrence of the last three in the left-hand column. He would be obliged to treat these as metaphors, albeit somewhat moribund ones. But once he had done that, he would have to show why the last three in the right-hand column cannot similarly be treated.

In fact we are better off if we forget about 'nature' and 'material motive' altogether.

(Bickerton 1969:38-9)

I am not sure that we are better off if we forget about nature and material motive altogether. Should a theory of metaphor really ignore the question of the intrinsic suitability of the signs used? Everything that Bickerton says is true enough in a sense; but is it not out of perspective? At least I wish to argue that there are reasons for paying attention also to other aspects of the nature of metaphors than those which Bickerton chooses to concentrate on. Bickerton continues:

The non-occurrence of steel-mines is only accidentally connected with the non-occurrence of steel-mines; yellow rats occurs, though there are no yellow rats. If there were something which might be described as a 'steel-mine', just as there are some persons who might be described as 'yellow rats', steel-mine would occur, even in the absence of steel-mines. The reason why no such thing exists is simply that, in English at least, no specific attribute has been attached to steel.

By 'specific attribute' is meant a particular quality, usually assumed to belong to the denotatum of a sign. Thus to iron, in English, is assigned the attribute 'hardness'. Natural as this may seem, it is in fact a fairly arbitrary process; hardness is only one of the attributes which iron might be supposed to possess (durability, weight, dark colour, etc.) and it possesses it to a lesser extent than many other substances, such as diamond, or, for that matter, steel itself. But to diamond has been attached the attribute 'value', perhaps also 'brightness'.

(Bickerton 1969:39)

Bickerton's argument moves at a level of great specificity. It may be that "steel determination", "steel will" and "steel discipline" are impossible in English and should be starred. But h o w impossible are they? In relation to the communicative need of the person using the metaphor -- who wanted to depict the determination, will and discipline as strong -- they may be impossible in one sense since "iron" is prescribed by convention, but nevertheless "steel" is m o r e possible in the context than e.g. "wax"; the difference being that wax is soft and steel hard.

Bickerton quotes the existence in other languages of a metaphoric use of steel as demonstration of the arbitrariness of the process:

> And the arbitrariness of the process is further demonstrated by the fact that it is not interlingual: hierro has no metaphorical value in Spanish, but acero has; even in loan-translations, iron curtain and iron lung are rendered as telón de acero and pulmón de acero respectively. Spanish simply attributes 'hardness' to steel rather than iron, thus reversing the English relationship.
>
> (Bickerton 1969:39)

But is this not rather a demonstration of the opposite?

That "steel" is possible in metaphors to suggest strength and hardness is indicated by its occurrence in Spanish (and other languages -- there are also languages where both "iron" and "steel" are used metaphorically).

That "steel determination" will come into existence as a metaphor of a strong determination is more likely than that "wax determination" will, simply because steel is harder and stronger than wax.

Bickerton stays within the rules and conventions of present-day English. But it has often been thought that the distinctive feature of metaphors is their capacity to break rules and function as an innovating force in language. And when the boundaries of language are extended with the aid of metaphor, the outstandingly important fact is the interpretability of new metaphors the first time they are used. Their interpretability, (which is closely related to a maximization of their intrinsic appropriateness), is the Darwinistic principle which ensures the survival of the fittest metaphors which man happens to think of.

On the level of great specificity the present state of occurrence of "iron will" and non-occurrence of *steel will is governed by arbitrary convention, but on the level of lesser specificity both the coming into existence of "iron will" in the past, and the probability that as a metaphor of a strong will "steel will" is more likely to come into existence in the future than "wax will", are governed by the non-arbitrary principle of

intrinsic suitability.

It may be desirable not to restrict oneself entirely to a level of very great specificity. As Roger Brown writes in Words and Things:

> The morpheme for hot stands for rage in Hebrew, enthusiasm in Chinese, sexual arousal in Thai and energy in Hausa. However, this disagreement does not suggest the operation of accidental factors since there is an undoubted kinship in the range of meanings. All seem to involve heightened activity and emotional arousal. No case was discovered in which the morpheme for hot named a remote, calm (in fact cool) manner.
>
> (Brown 1958:146)

This was predictable since anyone can see that heat induces speed and movement in nature whereas coldness induces slowness and repose. The predictability of new metaphors is intimately related to their interpretability. Bickerton's essay is synchronic:

> So far we have considered only the synchronic component of a theory of metaphor. Such a theory, however, cannot be merely synchronic, otherwise it could neither account for the history of attribute-assignment (i.e. how countless expressions which must originally have seemed 'metaphorical' have now come to be accepted as virtually or completely 'literal') nor, what is perhaps more important, explain how countless other expressions, which may as yeat not have occurred, may in the future pass through a similar process. For though in the present state of knowledge such a suggestion might seem wildly optimistic, the theory should have -- if future processes prove to be modelled on past ones -- at least some degree of predictive power.
>
> (Bickerton 1969:50)

It seems to me that for a theory of metaphor to have a predictive power it may be necessary to root that predictability in assumptions of the speakers' and listeners' knowledge of nature rather than in their knowledge of language. The metaphor "the man is a lion" can be explained either as natural ("lions are brave") or conventional ("it is agreed that lions should be regarded as brave") but for our skill in predicting, understanding and accepting new metaphors the former is more important.

The traditional view of metaphor stresses the principle of s i m i l a r i t y involved -- the man is similar to the lion in his courage, even though he is different in that he is a man and not a lion. In other words: there exist animals, and differences between these animals (in degrees of bravery, for instance), i.e. there is a system; and also there exist men, and differences between these men; and the metaphor "the man is a lion" means that the position of the man among humans is analogous to that of the lion among animals.

In a paragraph where he challenges the assumption that "the interpretability of texts is mode-of-discourse free" Bickerton writes:

> Everyone accepts that context can affect interpretation. Few realise that we need not go outside language to account for this.
>
> (Bickerton 1969:37)

I am not questioning Bickerton's argument at this specific point, but I am suspicious of the general tendency of theoretical treatises on the metaphor not to "go outside language". Not to go outside may be just as arbitrary as not to go inside from the point of view of an objective inquiry into the function of this type of communication.

3. Plant symbolism: the Cucurbits

In order to see what the function and mechanism of metaphors might look like if you start from the other end, i.e. from nature, I have, in collaboration with Jon Haarberg, undertaken a study in some depth of the symbolic use -- above all the use in metaphor, simile and figurative language -- of one plant family, the Cucurbitaceae. We have collected a number of occurrences from different countries, continents and languages, as well as from different centuries and millennia.

We found that the semiotic role of the cucurbits was highly predictable and that it can be explained almost entirely as resulting from the biology of the plant. Despite a certain range of variation -- and even some seeming contradiction or ambiguity -- at the level of great specificity, the use of the cucurbits in metaphors and similes clustered very thickly round their chief connotations, which are determined by the biology of the plants.

The cucurbits are rich both in positive and negative connotations. This at first seems contradictory but the contradiction results from different attitudes to the same thing, not from differences in perception.

The cucurbits are a typical "record"-species among vegetables; thus they acquire in a heightened form whatever connotations they pick up. They become the epitome of whatever class of concepts they belong to in one or another dimension of their existence. The centrifugal forces at work in the development of cucurbitic meaning are thus strong. Nevertheless the symbolic meanings the cucurbits acquire stay completely within the predictable, which suggests that their physiology is a strong guiding force in the development of their semiotic role.

In this essay it is impossible to present more than a few examples of

the use of cucurbits in metaphors and similes, but even these, I hope, will give an indication of the remarkable consistency of the material.

The cucurbits are symbols of life. Therefore a living, healthy person can be given, metaphorically, a cucurbitic appellation as in Russian огурчик, affect. dim. of огурец, person of ruddy, healthy appearance.

An eclectic, slightly hedonistic attitude to life (and particularly to one of its chief pleasures -- love) can be likened to the arbitrary knife of the melon-vendor who cuts here a slice and there a slice (of the symbol of life), cf. Alemán's Gvzman de Alfarache:[3]

> Soy cuchillo de melonero, ando picando cantillos, mudando hitos; oy aquí, mañana en Francia;

Alemán's metaphor becomes a simile in Mabbe's 1622 translation:[4]

> I am like a Melon-mongers Knife, cutting here a slice and there a slice, now at this corner, then at that, changing and altering my markes, rouing sometimes at one, sometimes at another, here to day (as they say) and to morrow in France.

Since the cucurbits are symbols of life they are often antithetically contrasted in literature with a symbol of death. The lily for the Greeks was the flower of death. The proverb "ἢ κολοκύντην ἢ κρίνον" (i.e. either a pumpkin or a lily) is preserved in fragments by the comic poets Diphilus and Menander.[5] Since the lily stands for death, the antonymic symbol, the pumpkin, stands for life.

As the cucurbit is a symbol of life, and blood the vital fluid of humans, the shedding of watermelon-juice is seen as analogous to the shedding of blood, as in the following simile in William Styron's Lie Down in Darkness:[6]

> [the tables] sagged with food, and around them the juice from discarded melon rinds ran like blood in the sand.

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[3] Mateo Alemán, Primera y Segvnda Parte de Gvzman de Alfarache. Madrid, 1661; first published 1599. 250.

[4] The Rogve: or The Life of Guzman de Alfarache. Written in Spanish by Matheo Alemán, Seruant to his Catholicke Maiestie, and borne in Sevill. London: Edward Blount. 1622. Part Second, 59.

[5] A. Meineke, Fragmenta Poetarum Comodiae Novae. Berlin: G. Reimer. 1841. Volume 4, 420; 331.

[6] William Styron, Lie Down in Darkness. London: Hamish Hamilton. 1952. 392.

Cutting a melon means killing it, since the melon is a symbol of life, cf. Edgar Wallace, The Angel of Terror:[7]

> "Jean gets no pleasure out of hurting people any more than you will get out of cutting that cantaloup. It has just got to be cut, and the fact that you are finally destroying the life of the melon doesn't worry you."
>
> "Have cantaloups life?" She paused, knife in hand, eyeing the fruit with a frown. "No, I don't think I want it. So Jean is a murderess at heart?"

The same idea is the basis of a comparison in Stephen Crane's short story "The Blue Hotel":[8]

> There was a great tumult, and then was seen a long blade in the hand of the gambler. It shot forward, and a human body, this citadel of virtue, wisdom, power was pierced as easily as if it had been a melon. The Swede fell with a cry of supreme astonishment.

The two principles of s i m i l a r i t y and d i f f e r e n c e which are co-present in metaphors give rise to a number of variations. In the example from Crane a man and a melon, although they are both examples of life and thus similar; yet, since one is human and the other not they s h o u l d, nevertheless, have been different; but to the knife they were similar after all. In the Wallace-example the idea is that to normal people there is a difference between cutting a melon and cutting human flesh -- even though both are prime examples of life -- but to the cruel woman Jean there is no difference.

In the next example an insurgent captured by the authorities realizes that his body has become only an encumbrance. He decides to confess so as to be executed more quickly:[9]

> Summary justice meanwhile was being dealt in Florence. Jacopo da Diacceto, on being put to the torture, unhesitatingly confessed: 'I wish to rid myself of this pumpkin of a body: we intended to kill the Cardinal.'

His body has become a symbol of useless life. Earlier it was different from a pumpkin, though both were examples of life; now it has become very similar

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[7] Edgar Wallace, The Angel of Terror. London: Pan Books. 1962. 117-8.

[8] The Complete Short Stories & Sketches by Stephen Crane. Ed. and introd. Thomas A. Gullason. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co. 1963. 505.

[9] Pasquale Villari, The Life and Times of Niccolo Macciavelli. Trans. Linda Villari. London: T. Fisher Unwin. 1842. Volume 2, 355-6.

and therefore worthless.

These examples of possible variations ended up stressing lack of difference. But other passages in literature may underline mainly the difference:[10]

> 'If that ben't particular,' replied he, 'Squire Lawrie, I'm a pumpkin, and the pigs may do their damnest with me.'

The implication is but I am not (a pumpkin, i.e. similar -- identicality in these metaphors is only a perfect form of similarity; hence these metaphors are only a perfect form of simile) and the speaker spells it out: "But I ain't a pumpkin, the Squire he knows that." (ibid.). Pumpkins and men are both examples of life, but men, being humans, are intelligent.

Or, in another example, the imputation is one of almost pure similarity (though we may assume that it stems from surprise at the perceived lack of difference):[11]

> "Das war der 'principe tedesco' von dem man so viel hörte? Dieser langweilige, grosse, phlegmatische Kürbis?"

Because of the basic difference between cucurbits and humans (humans are not vegetables), it may be an act of abuse to call someone cucurbitic names. On the other hand, because of the similarity (both being examples of life) to compare someone to a cucurbit may imply praise insofar as the positive features of the cucurbits are called to mind.

Because of the former of these the names of the cucurbits can function simply as words of abuse in metaphors and similes:[12]

> "Wer glaubst denn du zu sein,/dass du mich schelten willst, du Kürbiss?"

Also:[13]

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[10] John Galt, Lawrie Todd; or, The Settlers in the Woods. London: H. Colburn & R. Bentley. 1830. Volume 1, 90.

[11] Cf. H. Mrose, Berliner Philologischen Wochenschrift 12, 1914. 383; ref. to El-Correi, Westermanns Monatschrift 115.754.

[12] J.W. Goethe, Claudine von Villa Bella. Erster Aufzug. In Werke. Stuttgart/Tübingen: J.G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung. 1828. Volume 10, 224.

[13] Rule a Wife, and Have a Wife. In The Works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher. Cambridge English Classics. Volume 3 (Act I, Scene I), 178.

O here's another pumpion,
Let him loose for luck sake, the cram'd son
Of a stav'd Usurer, Cacafogo, both their brains butter'd,
Cannot make two spoonfulls.

Or:[14]

Thou Dog-whelp, thou, pox upon thee what
Should I call thee, Pompion,
Thou kiss my Lady? thou scour her chamber-pot;
Thou have a Maiden-head? a mottly Coat,
You great blind fool, farewel and be hang'd to ye,

On the other hand, comparing a person to a cucurbit can be something highly positive. The idea of life is connected with the idea of the continuation of life, thus of reproduction, and the cucurbits are accordingly very rich in sex-connotations. The poet Theopompus in one of his plays used the word melon to describe a beloved woman who is more luscious than a ripe melon:[15]

μαλθακωτέρα / πέπονος σικυοῦ μοι γέγονε.

Cf. also G.F. Ruxton:[16]

"Afore I left the settlements I know'd a white gal, and she was some pumpkins."

However, people have always approached sexual matters with somewhat ambivalent feelings and therefore there is often an element of ambiguity in these passages. Though his use is obviously in the main positive, Theopompus is after all a comic poet, and the American slang expression "some punkins" is typical of many American slang expressions in its ambiguity.

Because of the ambiguity inherent in co-present similarity and difference, and in the cucurbit as symbol, cucurbitic epithets in metaphors are very suited to the expression of ambivalent attitudes. The Jewish protagonist in Philip Roth's Portnoy's Complaint takes a very ambivalent attitude towards the shikse girl that he falls in love with at one stage. Therefore it is not surprising that he calls her "the pumpkin".[17]

[14] The Custom of the Country. In Works of Beaumont and Fletcher. Volume I (Act I, Scene I), 316.

[15] Athen. II. 68 d.

[16] George Frederick Ruxton, Life in the Far West. Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons. 1949. 266.

[17] Philip Roth, Portnoy's Complaint. London: Jonathan Cape. 1969. 216-32.

Because women have so often been given cucurbitic epithets -- positively, negatively, or ambiguously -- the feminist movement has inevitably become interested in the symbol that women are so often associated with. Accordingly the feminist Verena Stefan, in her Autobiografische Aufzeichnungen, explores her own attitudes to herself as a woman, and the various ideals of feminine beauty, and finally accepts being a "kürbisfrau"[18] with all that it entails of the swelling forms of breasts and hips etc.

Since cucurbits are associated with sex it is natural that the relevant parts of the body should be cucurbitically named. Thus we find "cucumis" in Plautus[19] associated with penis; "pyntegraeskar" for breasts, and "to sammenvoksede meloner" for numse, in Jørgen Nash[20]; the saying "to collect ἀγγούρια" (be a prostitute) in Mod. Gk.; the phallic garden-god, Priapus, is called the "cucurbitarum . . . custos"[21] etc. If these parts of the body are made artificially the ideal material is cucurbits; for an example of breasts made of gourds, see the Sut Lovingood-yarn "Sut Lovingood Reports What Bob Dawson Said, After Marrying a Substitute":[22]

> Why sister Sall, an' be durnd to you, she saw'd a round dry gourd in two, a gourd as big as my head, an' then made a hole in the middil ove each half, an' stuff'd in white oak acorns, butt first, an' dad shave me if she dident hist the whole contrapshun intu her buzzum.

Cucurbitic names are often used to imply sexual perversity. This is the case in Juvenal's sixth satire.[23]

> his violare cibos sacraeque adsistere mensae permittunt, et vasa iubent frangenda lavari cum colocyntha bibit vel cum barbata chelidon.

"Barbata chelidon" is undoubtedly feminine, the epithet semantically masculine. Undoubtedly the sex of the "colocyntha" is feminine. Precisely

[18] Verena Stefan, Autobiografische Aufzeichnungen: Gedichte, Träume, Analysen, Häutungen. München: Frauenoffensive. 1975. 123, see also 119.

[19] Plautus, Casina 907-13.

[20] Jørgen Nash, Galgenfuglen: Et Romaneksperiment. København: Gyldendals Tranebøger. 1967. 22.

[21] Priapea 63.12.

[22] George Washington Harris, Sut Lovingood's Yarns. Ed. M. Thomas Inge. New Haven: College & University Press. 1966. 280.

[23] Juvenal, Satires VI.365 (04-6).

what sort of sexual deviation is referred to is a moot point, but the character is probably an emasculated male.

All the cucurbits can function as symbols of sex, and specifically of either femininity or masculinity, but because of the difference in shape between the fruits of the various species there is some specialization due to intrinsic suitability (iconic relationship between signifier and signified), and thus the task of symbolizing masculinity is often assigned to the cucumber, whereas the more rounded fruit (pumpkin, melon,water-melon) are most often used to symbolize femininity (-- which, however, does not prevent pumpkin-seeds from being eaten for virility in Greece and Roumania: there are numerous exceptions). Because of this general tendency, which at times stabilizes into a fairly rigid code, it is possible to abuse a male by giving him a cucurbitic name symbolizing femininity, thus implying his lack of masculinity; or to abuse a woman by giving her a "male" cucurbitic name, implying her lack of femininity.

This throws some light on the phrase "O pepones" in Irenaeus. The author has just made violent fun of the gnostic Valentinus' cosmological structures, comparing his terms to a set of cucurbits,[24] and goes on to say, "O pepones, sophistae vituperabiles, et non viri (veri)". The Greek has only "Ὦ ληρολόγοι σοφισταί": The phrase "O pepones" is a misunderstanding (intentional?) of the epic "ὦ πέπονες" which has nothing to do with the fruit. Thus the line "O you pumpkins/weaklings, blameworthy sophists, and men no more", apparently plays not only on the absurdity of pumpkins but also on their femininity.

In a Greek work from the late nineteenth century the local match-maker in a village tries to talk the reluctant slim beauty of the village into marrying a young merchant boy whom the girl dislikes. The match-maker asks the girl why she is disgusted; does she not like the big cucumber? -- in Greek:[25]

Γιατί, δυγατέρα; δὲ σ' ἀρέσει ὁ ἀγγουρος;

Here, in the case of the boy, it is not a matter of a switch of sexes as in those passages in literature where an insufficient conformity with one's

[24] Interpres Irenaei Adv. haer. I.11.4; Patrologia Graeca VII, c. 567.

[25] Α. Καρκαβίτσας, Ἡ Λυγερή (Ἐν Ἀθήναις: Τυπογραφεῖον τῆς "Ἑστίας", 1896), σελ. 22.

own sex is implied, but rather a question of a heightening of the masculinity of the boy. The symbolic use of cucumber is so pronounced that it even determines the gender of the word. "Cucumber" in Mod. Gk. is neuter: τὸ ἀγγούρι. Here, however, the match-maker uses a masculine form: ὁ ἀγγουσος.

In addition one would have expected the accent to fall on the penultimate syllable; the match-maker, however, puts the accent on the initial (the antepenultimate) syllable. She is really playing with the word, going against the expectations that the rules would create. She lengthens the word phonetically, which by analogy makes it seem as if there were that much more of the boy, as it were.

"Sjögurka" is used as a vaguely sexual taunt in Tove Jansson's Pappan och havet.[26] In Procopius' Anecdota Justinian's "praefectus urbis", Theodotus, is named "Pumpkin" which in this context -- considering that Theodora was a nymphomaniac -- must be a sexual nick-name.[27] The form is κολοκύντιον which is hypocoristic, probably implying insufficiency or lack of interest in Theodora's special attractions.

Cucurbits are used in connection with courtship in literature; sometimes positively as in Ken Kesey's Sometimes a Great Notion, in which one of the main male characters, Hank, gets his wife from a city labelled "The Watermelon Capitol of the World"[28]; sometimes negatively as in Tolstoy's The Kreutzer Sonata, in which the uxoricide Pózdnyshev, recounting with bitterness how he was lured into marriage, says that he was brought up in an atmosphere which produced enamoured young men as cucumbers are forced in a hot-house atmosphere:[29]

> - Да, так вот меня эти дверси, и лононы, и нашлепки поймали. Поймать же меня легко было, потому что я воспитан был в тех условиях, при которых, как огурцы на парах;

and sometimes again ambiguously as in Dickens's Nicholas Nickleby where the "gentleman in small-clothes" courts Mrs Nickleby by throwing cucumbers and

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[26] Tove Jansson, Pappan och Havet. Helsingfors: Almqvist & Wiksell. 1975 (first published 1965). 144-6 & passim.

[27] Procopius, Anecdota 9.37.

[28] Ken Kesey, Sometimes a Great Notion. London: Magnum Books. 1976. 156-69 & passim.

[29] Л.Н. Толстой, Собрание сочинений, Том двенадцатый, ред. Н.Н. Аноповой, Н.К. Гудзия, Н.Н. Гусева, М.Б. Храпченко (Москва: Издательство "Художественная Литература", 1964), 150.

vegetable-marrows over the garden wall.[30]

In "watermelons" (sometimes "pumpkins") as a word of abuse for blacks in the United States several connotations are activated; laziness (immobility), stupidity, absurdity, rusticity and lack of class-status etc.; but the sexuality-myths about negroes also play a role, fitting in with the fertility- and sex-connotations of the cucurbits.

When Kunta Kinte in Haley's Roots compares the bandage on his foot to a pumpkin (it seems as big as a "punkin"),[31] there is a basic similarity in size, but symbolically the bandage on the wound that restricts his freedom, thus making him a true slave, should be associated with the favourite fruit of the American black slaves.

Life is closely linked with its opposite death, and the cucurbitic plants, which grow quickly and die easily, acquire numerous symbolic roles in connection with life-death. Athenaeus calls attention to the quick growth of the cucurbits[32] reporting that the very etymology of the words has been thought to imply vigour, vitality and fertility.[33] The translation of the Hebrew קִיקָיוֹן in Jonah IV.6. as κολοκύντη in the Septuagint and the corresponding "cucurbita" in the Vetus Latina has given rise to an extraordinarily rich tradition of the gourd symbolizing the quickly-growing but short-lived. For example:[34]

> A fire-new Noble, whom the war hath raised
> To price and currency, a Jonah's Gourd,
> An over-night creation of court-favour,

Or:[35]

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[30] Charles Dickens, Nicholas Nickleby. Ed. introd. and notes Michael Slater. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1978 (first published 1839). 567-70, 616-22, 629, 737-43 & passim -- generally in chapters 37, 41 and 49.

[31] Alex Haley, Roots: The Epic Drama of One Man's Search for His Origins. London: Picador. 1977. 234.

[32] Athen. III. 74 c.

[33] Athen. III. 74 b.

[34] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Piccolomini: Or, The First Part of Wallenstein. A Drama. Translated from the German of Schiller. In The Complete Poetical Works. Ed. E.H. Coleridge. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1912. Volume 2, 700 (Act IV, Scene VII).

[35] John Gauden, A Sermon Preached in the Temple-Chappel, at the Funeral of the Right Reverend Father in God, Dr. Brounrig, etc. London: Andrew Cook. 1660. 72.

"Yet we have lived to see many short-lived Gourd-Lords, created in a chaos of times from very small principles or preexistency of birth"

A very dramatic way to depict destruction and death is to show the Vergänglichkeit of the symbol of life itself, the gourd. Thus the withered gourd is considered a fitting image of destruction; cf. the following simile in Blake:[36]

And all the mountains & hills shrink up like a withering gourd.

Let us return to the two co-present ideas of similarity and difference to consider some further examples of cucurbits used when human life has become non-human and vegetable-like:[37]

'Of course, the people that doctors refer to as squashes,' pursued Fletcher, 'the invertebrates, you might say, just lie there like vegetables.'

In Méchamment les oiseaux by Suzanne Prou, the narrator is suffering from illness, primarily mental, and he compares his existence to vegetation, and accordingly likens his head to a cucurbit:[38]

Je ne me réjouis ni ne m'attriste. Je vis à peine. Je végète, allongé tout le long du jour, pareil à une plante rampante. Parfois, pour parfaire la ressemblance, il me semble que des feuilles me poussent, ici et là, que j'atteins les objets qui m'environnent avec des vrilles plutôt qu'avec mes mains. Ma tête enfle comme une coloquinte: je réfléchis; j'étudie le présent et le passé.

The whole of a human body need not be likened to a cucurbit. You can also compare any of its parts to a cucurbit to suggest some fault in the functioning of that part.

Thus Aristophanes about eyes in the Clouds, when Strepsiades cannot see what the philosopher sees in the sky. Socrates says:[39]

"νῦν γέ τοι ἤδη καθορᾷς αὐτάς,
εἰ μὴ λημᾷς κολοκύνταις."

[36] The Complete Writings of William Blake: With Variant Readings. Ed. Geoffrey Keynes. London: Oxford U.P. 1966. Jerusalem: The Emanation of The Giant Albion 1804 Printed by W. Blake Sth Molton St Written and Etched 1804-1820. Plate 66, l. 82.

[37] James Thurber, The Cane in the Corridor. The Thurber Carnival. Written and illus. James Thurber. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1962. 45.

[38] Suzanne Prou, Méchamment les Oiseaux. Paris: Calmann-Lévy. 1971. 1212.

[39] Aristophanes, Nubes 327.

About legs cf. the expression "cucumber shins",[40] or consider Anaxilas:[41]

τὰ δὲ σκύρ' ᾤδει μᾶλλον ἢ σικυὸς πέπων.

Tertullianus, in a passage in Adversus Marcionem, on the incarnation, asks:[42]

> "Cur autem panem corpus suum appellat, et non magis peponem, quem Marcion cordis loco habuit?"

Marcion has a pumpkin for a heart, which suggests stupidity, since the heart was regarded as the seat of reason in antiquity.

Likening a head to a pumpkin in order to imply stupidity is widespread both in similes and metaphors in literature: cf. Wodehouse "head like a pumpkin"[43] or Joyce: "head like a prize pumpkin."[44] The word "pumpkin-head", implying stupidity, exists in many languages: e.g. Ger. Kürbiskopf; Croatian tvrda tikva; Bulgarian likewise тиква or кратуна ; It. cocomero, zucca zuccone, peponella, mellone, citrullo; Fr. melon, citrouille, cornichon; Sp. calabaza, sandio; etc.[45] All imply some stupidity, but if there are several capito-cucurbitic words in the same language there may be some gradation and division of labour. Thus in Mod. Gk. there is a rather clear hierarchy so that κολοκυδοκέφαλος , pumpkin-headed, is the most negative; καρπουζοκέφαλος , water-melon-headed, is sligthly milder; and πεπονοκέφαλος , melon-headed, even implies cleverness.

"Pumpkinhead" usually implies thickness, but it may also imply softness, which is equally damaging; or emptyness which is also bad, as in the Swabian saying, "Der hat'n Kopf wie eine Kürbis, vornen sind Kerne und hinten is nix".[46] Pumpkin-head may also be associated with baldness as in "as bald as a pumpkin shell"[47] (cf. It. "zucconare").

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[40] Washington Irving, Salmagundi: or, The Whim-Whams and Opinions of Launcelot Langstaff, Esq and Others etc. London: J.M. Richardson. 1811. Volume 1, 102. -- Another example: Robert B. Todd, (ed.) The Cyclopaedia of Anatomy and Physiology. London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans & Roberts. 1849-1852. Volume 4, Part 2, 1332, c. 1.

[41] Athen. II. 68 c and d.

[42] Tert. Adv. Marc. IV. 40. 3.

[43] P.G. Wodehouse, Joy in the Morning. London: Barrie & Jenkins. 1974. 9.

[44] James Joyce, Ulysses. New York: Random House. 1934. 159.

[45] Cf. also "stupidity", It. "melonaggine"; and "stupid talk", "nonsense", Mod. Gk. "κολοκύδια" (pl. of "το κολοκύδι").

[46] Hermann Fischer, Schwäbisches Wörterbuch. Tübingen: H. Laupp'schen Buchhandlung. 1901.

[47] Sir Samuel W. Baker, The Nile Tributaries of Abyssinia: And the Sword Hunters of the Hamran Arabs. London: Macmillan and Co. 1867. 208.

One should not put a crown on a cucurbitic head; cf. Crane: "And melons are crowned by the crowd."[48] The most famous parallel to this passage is Seneca's Apocolocynthosis of the emperor Claudius.

Looking at our material it was obvious that there was some variation. But this variation seemed to exist at a level of great specificity and there was always a common kernel to the passages, and always an explanation for the simile or metaphor in the biology of the cucurbit.

In "A piece of pure Gold in form of a Mellon"[49] the link is the yellow colour (apart from gold being a symbol of riches, and the cucurbits a symbol of fertility, which is the force that creates riches in a rural society).

In "the warm melon lay like a little sun on the tawny sand"[50] the sun and the melon have their circular form in common, apart from the melon being associated with summer warmth.

In the party of the Deipnosophistae, one of the participants, Clearchus, tells a story about a free-loader who is called "cucumber" (Σικύα) from the way he clings to parties.[51] This was predictable because of the clinging and clutching propensities of the cucurbits who are trailing plants with tendrils, needing the support of e.g. a prop or a garden wall -- i.e. b a s i c - a l l y t h e s u p p o r t o f o t h e r s .

John Hacket uses "Pumpian" to denigrate the excessive rhetoric of the Spanish:[52]

> But can that Nation pass over such a Triumph as this Entertainment, without Pumpian Words, and ruffling Grandiloquence?

"Pumpian Words" are naturally, like the cucurbits, characterized by excessive swollenness.

It is an amusing empiric test of people's cucurbitic competence to mention that Shakespeare calls only one of his characters "pumpion" and ask people to name the character. It is quite astonishing how most people will immediately pick Falstaff, who is fat (iconic relationship); absurd like a

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[48] The Poems of Stephen Crane. A critical edition by Joseph Katz. New York: Cooper Square. 1971. 93.

[49] London Gazette. 1691. No. 2724/2.

[50] The Poems of Tennyson. Ed. Christopher Ricks. London & Harlow: Longmans, Green and Co. 1969. 1278.

[51] Athen. VI. 257 a.

[52] John Hacket, Scrinia Reserata: A Memorial Offer'd to the Great Deservings of John Williams, D.D. Who some time held the Places of etc. London: Edw. Jones for Samuel Lowndes. 1693. Part I, 120.

pumpkin; humorous like a pumpkin; a glutton (cucurbits being a glutton's food); who drinks (wateriness connotations); and is at this stage in the Merry Wives unsuccesfully trying to seduce a woman (sex connotations).[53]

4. Conclusion

Having collected our examples of cucurbitic usage in literature, we had to ask ourselves in each case whether an occurrence was due to tradition or to independent creation. There was certainly tradition -- particularly rich in the two cases of Jonah and Seneca -- and there were certain set phrases which had developed into clichés.

Nevertheless it would be difficult to explain the remarkable consistency of the material merely in terms of adherence to convention. We are thus inclined to believe that although cucurbitic passages should be explained both in terms of convention and in terms of nature, the role of nature may be the most important. When a person reads or listens to a cucurbitic metaphor, perhaps sometimes, in order to interpret it, his thoughts go to his store of knowledge of a cucurbitic tradition, or maybe sometimes again to his store of knowledge of the plants or vegetables themselves; but we think that the latter is more important; partly since it can explain the interpretability of new metaphors. Even when a person has a knowledge of both convention and nature we still think that nature is most important, because constant reinforcement of the meaning from nature helps the convention to survive. In other words: it seems that using the stupid bird "goose" as a sign of stupidity is better than using an intelligent bird, since every user of the sign can then get at its meaning not only through his knowledge of the code (which could have been arbitrary), but also by deducing on his own the meaning of the sign through observing that part of nature from which it is taken.

We found that cucurbitic symbolism tended not to exist, or not to survive, in those parts of the world which lack the plants themselves. This might suggest that users of cucurbitic metaphors, even if the metaphors be primarily convention, nevertheless constantly revitalize the convention by fresh observation of that part of nature that the conventional metaphor originally stems from. Thus metaphors making use of nature (plants,

[53] The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare: The Merry Wives of Windsor. Ed. H.J. Oliver. London: Methuen & Co. 1971. 81 (Act III, Scene III, 35-36).

animals, metals etc.) preserve a link with their origin and are, to a high degree, non-arbitrary.

Whether you say "What an absurd pumpkin!" about a pumpkin, or "What an absurd man!" about a man, depends on which you want to talk about, the pumpkin or the man; and that is a choice between real-world objects and outside the realm of linguistics. But when you say "What an absurd pumpkin!" about a m a n , the pumpkin is no longer a real-world object but a sign in a system of meaning, and the investigation of its function should be regarded as part of linguistics.

Yet, even so, the capability of users of the sign to grasp its meaning -- their cucurbitic competence -- is not only dependent on their knowledge of cucurbitic tradition, but also, and maybe primarily, on their knowledge of cucurbitic nature. The study of metaphor is therefore one area where the investigator cannot ultimately escape reality.

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